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Multilingualism

Multilingualism in the United Nations system organizations: status of implementation

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Multilingualism in the United Nations system organizations: status of implementation" (JIU/REP/2011/4).

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Summary

The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Multilingualism in the United Nations system organizations: status of implementation" reviews key dimensions of multilingualism in the United Nations organizations, analysing its rationale and policy implications, and identifying effective measures to foster its implementation. The research included the following areas: conference services; recruitment; training; outreach; and institutional partnerships.

The present note presents the views of the United Nations system organizations on the recommendations provided in the report. The views have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and supported most of the analysis and conclusions contained in it.

I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Multilingualism in the United Nations system organizations: status of implementation" sought to assess the status of implementation of multilingualism throughout the organizations of the United Nations system by reviewing different aspects related to language services and uses, including access to information and the development of multilingual websites, with a view to ensuring parity among the official languages and the working languages of the secretariats of the organizations. The report reviews key dimensions of multilingualism in the United Nations system organizations, analysing its rationale and policy implications, and identifying effective measures to foster its implementation. The research included the following areas: conference services; recruitment; training; outreach; and institutional partnerships.

II. General comments

2. The United Nations system organizations remain committed to multilingualism and to the promotion of the official and working languages. They largely support the main recommendations of the report and appreciate the willingness of the Joint Inspection Unit to incorporate their comments and suggestions at various stages in the process.

3. While organizations found the report useful and interesting, they note that the recommendations create an impression that multilingualism at the United Nations is "broken". The report highlights the difficulty of assessing the level of support for the recommendations from United Nations organizations that already face competing priorities within limited, stagnating budgets. Some organizations note that certain recommendations could gain from a cost-benefit analysis, in particular those recommendations that have clear financial and staff-time implications. Organizations also stress that they have made great efforts to satisfy their language needs based on approved mandates, staff and resources. Furthermore, they indicate that they have made great efforts to provide staff with opportunities to learn and master any of the six official languages of the United Nations.

4. When it comes to language specialists, organizations acknowledge that more work could be done to recognize the efforts of staff in language positions and to provide them with career opportunities, such as ensuring functional mobility. Agencies assert, however, that many staff members who initiated their service in the language area of the United Nations have moved on to other functions within the Organization and that they are on equal footing with all staff in terms of eligibility for consideration for vacancies. This not only enhances retention but also allows the United Nations to take advantage of their specific language skills in other substantive areas.

5. In terms of recruitment, the United Nations now uses the World Higher Education Database of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which provides a systematic assessment of degree-granting institutions and their equivalencies.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads who have not yet done so should: (a) appoint a senior official as coordinator for multilingualism, tasked with proposing strategic action plans for the effective implementation of multilingualism, with the assistance of an internal network of focal points within their respective organization; (b) report regularly to their legislative bodies on progress achieved in this regard.

6. The United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads, through their participation in the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), should develop a common understanding of the differences between "official" and "working" languages as a coherent basis for better coordinating the use of languages and promoting multilingualism across the United Nations system.

7. The General Assembly has emphasized the paramount importance of equality of the six official languages of the United Nations and has reaffirmed the need to respect the equality of the two working languages of the Organization and the use of additional working languages in specific duty stations. While the United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation, they note that there exists a common understanding of the differences between "official" and "working" languages based on the decisions of legislative and governing bodies in most organizations as a basis for better coordinating the use of languages and for promoting multilingualism throughout the system.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads should take further effective measures towards eliminating the current imbalance in the use of the working languages within secretariats, including among senior managers, and require all staff to develop their language skills so as to acquire good knowledge of at least a second working language.

8. The United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation, which ensures language diversity. Not only do many staff members of the organizations take advantage of language classes to improve their linguistic skills, but organizations also encourage equal access to language training facilities by all staff members.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, in monitoring the equitable use of official languages within their respective organization, regularly assess users' needs and formulate strategies to enhance the implementation of multilingualism through the involvement of their respective coordinators for multilingualism and related network of focal points.

9. The United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation, which enables their organizations to communicate multilingually — and therefore equitably — with stakeholders.

Recommendation 5

CEB should establish an ad hoc network or working group, involving the coordinators for multilingualism in the respective organizations, to take account of the key recommendations of the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publication, and translate them into strategies of action for conference and language services management, so that better coordination and resources-sharing would result in significant cost savings, higher productivity and effectiveness in the work of the organizations.

10. The United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation aimed at improving coordination and resource-sharing in order to generate possible cost savings, higher productivity and improved effectiveness in the work of the system. They note that coordination and resource-sharing mechanisms exist within some United Nations system organizations. For example, as part of their standard procedures, the secretariats of the three Rome-based organizations consistently coordinate their activities to generate cost savings and foster higher productivity and effectiveness. Any future efforts to establish an ad hoc network or working group should make use of current technologies.

Recommendation 6

When creating new institutional bodies that would require the provision of conference services, the legislative bodies of the United Nations system organizations should plan for the budgetary resources associated with the resulting additional workload, in particular for translation and interpretation.

11. The United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads should take the necessary measures to ensure full compliance with the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC)-United Nations agreement for interpretation and the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions-International Association of Conference Translators (CCAQ-AITC) agreement for translation, in particular by ensuring greater awareness of these agreements at Headquarters and in the regional offices, and by setting up compliance monitoring systems.

12. The United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation. Most organizations have taken all steps to comply fully with the AIIC-United Nations agreement for interpretation and the CCAQ-AITC agreement for translation.

Recommendation 8

The legislative bodies of the organizations of the United Nations system should ensure that the necessary resources are allocated within the organizations to

achieve effective succession planning and dispense targeted training to candidates to language examinations.

13. The United Nations system organizations, noting that this recommendation is directed at legislative bodies, support and welcome it, in particular in dealing with the increased workload of multilingualism and the shortage of language staff.

Recommendation 9

The executive heads should prepare strategic action plans in the area of language services to address the examination, candidate-selection and recruitment processes, and propose incentives for language career development and language staff retention, bearing in mind that Member States have different education systems and none of them shall be considered the standard one.

14. The United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation. They agree that greater efforts should be made to recruit, promote and retain professionals with language skills and that strategic action plans in this area would be useful. The organizations note, however, that there is a competitive recruitment process in the United Nations for various language positions as well as career development initiatives. Career development of all staff, including language staff, is of paramount importance to the Secretary-General, who remains mindful of the costs to implement any modifications and changes, in particular in the current fiscal environment.

Recommendation 10

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his capacity as Chair of CEB, should address the issues of the language examinations, recruitment and promotion in language services, career development and training for language staff, and incentives for recruiting and retaining the best language professionals, with the assistance of the coordinators for multilingualism, through the ad hoc network or working group proposed in recommendation 5.

15. The United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation.

Recommendation 11

The executive heads should take the necessary measures to ensure that the recruitment process, including that relating to senior officials, fully and fairly addresses language requirements, so that in the medium term, the organizations of the system could rely on a multilingual workforce that is fluent in one working language and has good knowledge of at least one other working language, with due attention to the specific needs of the duty stations.

16. While the United Nations system organizations welcome this recommendation in spirit, they find it difficult to implement uniformly in practice, given the different mandates and needs of staff with diverse skills and expertise.

17. The organizations also note that staff selection must always take into consideration the full range of qualifications and experience that a candidate provides, of which the full knowledge of either of the working languages is one component, and note that many positions do not require full knowledge of a second

working language. While agencies agree that the workforce as a whole should acquire language skills in more than one working language, they stress that this cannot be a requirement for each individual staff member. This would not exclude selecting candidates who are fluent in only one working language and leaves open the possibility of training staff in languages after they successfully join the United Nations system, which is an option open to all serving staff.

18. With respect to comments in the report relevant to recommendation 11, the organizations note that as for staff of human resources offices who have a command of at least two working languages of the United Nations, it would be difficult to single out one particular occupational group as a guiding example.

Recommendation 12

The legislative bodies of the organizations of the United Nations system should direct and approve the necessary support to the executive heads to develop multilingual websites in all their official or working languages, with due attention to the language specificities of the duty stations concerned.

19. The United Nations system organizations note that in times of austerity the financial implications of maintaining multilingual documentation (and websites) are considerable. The organizations are mindful of the decision of the General Assembly, in its resolution 66/246 of 24 December 2011, by which the Assembly endorsed the proposal of the Secretary-General to provide conference services to United Nations funds and programmes in New York on a "pay-as-you-go" policy, beginning on 1 January 2012, and on this basis organizations support and welcome this recommendation.

Recommendation 13

The Secretary-General of the United Nations should actively promote the development of language-related events, such as the Language Day initiative, to increase awareness of multilingualism challenges and to disseminate information to Member States, academia and other partners, seeking, as appropriate, their support through innovative partnerships or ad hoc extrabudgetary contributions.

20. The organizations note that based on the experience of the past two years, lack of dedicated funding had constrained the promotion of the development of language-related events such as Language Days both at the headquarters and field levels. Moreover, the varying levels of support received from external partners for the different Language Days prevented the development and application of a consistent programme for each official language that was both substantive and meaningful.

21. In view of the lessons learned, future Language Day-related activities are being considered through Internet-based and social media campaigns that would reach larger numbers of United Nations staff at headquarters and other duty stations, as well as Member States and the public at large. Given the challenges faced in efforts to provide multilingual content, organizing additional language-related events could divert attention and resources from the urgent and continuous need, as expressed recently by Member States in the Committee on Information, to generate materials in all official languages, to achieve a degree of parity and thereby promote multilingualism.

22. The United Nations system organizations, however, continue to produce information in many languages. For example, the 63 United Nations information centres regularly produce information materials in more than 40 languages and currently maintain websites in 29 local languages. Over the years, the information centres have translated and produced print material, including publications, audiovisual material and other products in 153 languages. Currently, 34 information centres produce their own newsletters/bulletins, on a weekly, monthly or quarterly basis, including in 17 local languages. The United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe in Brussels alone produces information materials in 13 languages.

Recommendation 14

The executive heads of the organizations of the United Nations system delivering work in the field in the areas of humanitarian affairs, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and development activities, among others, should ensure that due attention is given to delivering their activities and related materials in all official or working languages, taking account of the local language(s) of the beneficiaries.

23. The United Nations system organizations support and welcome this recommendation. They note that most organizations strive to produce their public material in as many languages as possible.

Recommendation 15

As a matter of policy, the legislative bodies of the organizations of the United Nations system should endorse, including through budgetary channels, the arrangements required to ensure effective compliance in delivering the organizations' core work in all official and working languages.

24. While the organizations support and welcome this recommendation, and recognize that it is directed at legislative bodies, they note that current core contributions from Member States in general provide only for translation and interpretation for legislative bodies and official meetings, not for the types of outreach and communication in multiple languages that most organizations hope to achieve.